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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 001272

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TAGS: PROP PGOV PREL PHUM CH
SUBJECT: EMBASSY PROTESTS TREATMENT OF AMERICAN JOURNALISTS

REF: BEIJING 1096

Classified By: Information Officer Susan Stevenson.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Following reports of detention and harassment of U.S. journalists attempting to report in Tibetan areas of western China, the Embassy has thrice protested to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In an April 17 meeting, PressOff asked the MFA to clarify rules governing foreign media reporting in the provinces. The MFA Information Department official denied that regulations had changed and suggested that Chinese authorities were merely persuading journalists to avoid dangerous roads. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On March 10 and April 17, the Press Office conveyed its concern to MFA Information Department North American, European and Oceanian Affairs Office Director Tang Rui regarding harassment and detention of foreign (including U.S.) journalists reporting in Tibetan areas of western China. PressOff reiterated China's stated policy that journalists, except when traveling to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), did not need permission from provincial authorities to conduct reporting work. PressOff detailed the overnight detention in southern Gansu Province of New York Times correspondent Andrew Jacobs. On April 17, PressOff protested the April 7 treatment of VOA Bureau Chief Stephanie Ho and her driver, who were stopped by security forces and detained in their vehicle while driving to Kangding, Sichuan Province. Chinese authorities eventually forced them to turn back.

NEW REGULATIONS NOT EVENLY IMPLEMENTED IN PROVINCES

¶3. (C) In a March 13 telcon with PressOff, Tang Rui admitted that new regulations allowing foreign media to report throughout China without prior approval from provincial officials had not been implemented evenly throughout the provinces. Tang agreed there were instances of Chinese provincial authorities stopping foreign journalists due to ignorance of the new regulations. He claimed that journalists were sometimes prevented from traveling for their own safety due to dangerous road conditions. Tang requested the Embassy's assistance in conveying to American journalists the need to cooperate with Chinese authorities for their own protection. PressOff expressed hope that such incidents did not indicate a wider clampdown on foreign journalists in China.

NO POLICY CHANGE FOR REPORTING IN TIBETAN AREAS...

¶4. (C) Later, in an April 28 meeting with PressOff, Tang stated that there had been no change in Chinese

regulations for foreign journalists reporting in Tibetan areas. Except for traveling to the TAR, Tang said that journalists did not need to request permission from local authorities. This included Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. When PressOff requested clarification, as this seemed to contradict MFA spokesperson Jiang Yu's April 14 comments regarding the need to request permission from provincial authorities for travel to Tibetan areas, Tang reiterated that no local approval was needed outside the TAR. Moreover, he noted that, should journalists encounter problems, they could contact provincial information departments. Phone numbers for such offices, Tang claimed, were publicly available. (Note: VOA told EmbOff that contact information for the Ganzi local press office, to which they were directed after being stopped in Kangding, was not publicly available.)

...EXCEPT FOR SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

¶5. (C) Tang qualified his comments by saying that certain areas of China could be cordoned off for event-specific reasons. He noted that VOA's trip to Kangding and Ganzi was one such example, as Chinese authorities had "urged" VOA to avoid the area due to dangerous roads. Tang denied that the VOA journalists had been "detained" as they had merely been dissuaded from traveling to a dangerous area. When EmbOff countered that prohibiting the vehicle occupants from moving the car forward or backward,

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or leave the car gave the impression of "detention," Tang insisted that Chinese authorities had merely been "persuading" the journalists to act in their own interests.

WESTERN JOURNALISTS EXHIBIT "BAD BEHAVIOR"

¶6. (C) Tang provided examples of Western journalists not cooperating with Chinese authorities. Two were trivial (an American journalist yelling at staff in the Beijing International Media Center during the Olympics because she could not connect to certain websites; another American journalist pushing through a police line while reporting on last year's Sichuan earthquake), while one was more substantive (a U.S. new service's use of Chinese assistants as foreign journalists to report on the National People's Congress, in violation of Chinese law, see reftel).

COMMENT

¶7. (C) We do not expect these cases of official harassment of American journalists to decrease. On May 5, for example, an Amcit journalist with the Financial Times notified PressOff that he had just been assaulted by provincial authorities and ordered out of Mianzhu, Fuxin County, Sichuan Province for trying to interview the mother of a child killed in the May 12, 2008 earthquake. We protested this incident to the MFA May 8.

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